

West Hartford Public Schools

Agenda Item: Middle School Teaming
Meeting Date: November 8, 2017
From: Andrew Morrow, Assistant Superintendent for Administration
Through: Tom Moore, Superintendent

Background:

As part of last year's budget deliberations, the West Hartford BOE asked for a better understanding of middle school teaming, including its history and the goals of this configuration. Teaming, or the organization of students into smaller learning groups, is a component of each of our three middle schools. Teaming seeks to address the academic and social/emotional transition for adolescents as they move from the one classroom of 5th grade, to the larger independency of high school. By taking a middle school of 900 students and organizing those students into groups of 100-120 students, a smaller learning environment is created and students are able to transition to middle school.

Teaming has long been an established factor in middle schools, traditionally serving to define these organizations in opposition to junior high schools, or more recently, K-8 schools. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) supported this structure in stating "the interdisciplinary team of two to four teachers working with a common group of students is the signature component of high-performing schools, literally the heart of the school from which other desirable programs and experiences evolve."

Educators have recognized the unique developmental needs of adolescent learners over the past five decades and have strived to meet these needs through the development of middle school programs. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's 1989 report, *Turning Points*, set recommendations for developing effective structures to address middle school needs, urging that educational leaders:

1. Create small learning communities to foster closer relationships between adults and peers.
2. Develop a common core of knowledge that promotes critical thinking and ethical behavior.
3. Organize middle schools to promote success for all students through heterogeneous grouping and cooperative learning.
4. Recognize that teachers and administrators have the responsibility and power to transform middle schools by structures, such as academic teams, and processes like shared decision making.

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5. Develop teachers who are experts at teaching middle grade adolescents.
6. Promote good health—recognizing that the education and physical and emotional health of adolescents is inextricably linked.
7. Engage families in the educational process to support the learning process at home and to promote trust and mutual respect.
8. Encourage the development of strong school and community partnerships through service learning projects and other collaborative efforts.

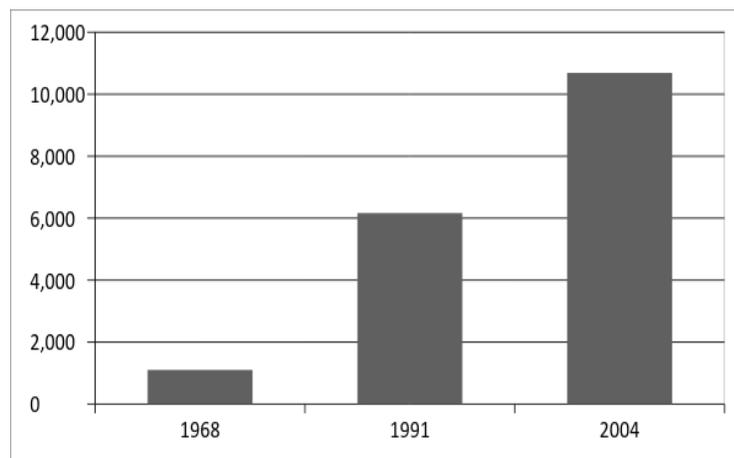
These recommendations have served as the foundation for the development of middle schools with a strong sense of vision and purpose as they strive to meet the needs of adolescent learners. When schools are structured into smaller units, closer relationships are fostered between teachers and students, resulting in stronger working relationships and individualized attention.

From a developmentally responsive approach to student learning, middle schools have been designed to fill the transition between the elementary, one classroom experience, and the multi-teacher experience of the modern high school. The middle school movement and its transformation of schools has been called “the largest and most comprehensive effort at educational reorganization in the history of American public schooling.”

Prior to middle schools, the junior high school, with grades 7-8 or 7-9, was the common experience for students, yet dissatisfaction with this model was beginning to grow as early as the mid 1950’s. As their name implies, junior high schools largely mimicked the structure of high schools in their desire to prepare students for the academic rigor of the next level. In doing so, junior high schools were viewed by many as too departmentalized in their curriculum and instruction.

Figure 1 shows the growth of middle schools since 1968.

Figure 1: Growth of Middle Schools. (Valentine, 2005)



Striving to address what has been described as the “volatile mismatch . . . between the organization of middle grades schools, and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of young adolescents,” the National Middle School Association developed the original position paper *This We*

Believe in 1982. Consistent with the document's original vision, the most recent edition defines middle school instruction as being:

1. Developmentally responsive to the unique nature of adolescents as the basis for organizational structure and instructional decisions.
2. Challenging for all students.
3. Empowering for adolescents to be creators of knowledge and learn the skills necessary to become independent learners and, ultimately, adults.
4. Equitable in providing equal opportunities for all students to be appropriately challenged.

Over the years, middle schools in America have been characterized as the “muddle in the middle.” Yet we know that middle school practices, such as teaming, are child-centered and meet the unique developmental and academic needs of adolescents. Interdisciplinary teams have become a cornerstone of middle schools and the education of adolescents and are widely used throughout the world. In bringing together teachers and students for collaboration, interdisciplinary teams are designed to:

- a) Develop coordinated academic and intervention management strategies to address student learning and/or behavioral needs.
- b) Provide coordinated communication with parents and other parties (e.g. school administrators, school counselors).

Our three middle school principals, Joy Wright, Andrew Clapsaddle, and Steve Cook will expand upon these key goals of middle school teaming and answer any questions that the Board may have.